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ABSTRACT

Prepared to accompany an Australian letter writing guide for students, this teachers' guide provides suggestions for integrating letter writing into the school curriculum, either through regularly scheduled activities during the school year, or through special letter writing units of a few weeks. Topics covered in the guide include: (1) the craft of letter writing; (2) developing the writing habit; (3) how to be a "fabulous letter writing" class; (4) post office boxes in the classroom; (5) class writing projects (including the world's longest letter, the world's biggest letter, Dear Teacher..., and welcome to class...); (6) across the curriculum with a social studies bias (including writing letters within and outside of Australia, letters as bridges, please-send-me-some-information letters, and letters to local, state, and commonwealth officials); (7) letters in mathematics classes; (8) letters in history classes; (9) letters and music and poetry; (10) letters and arts and crafts; and (11) a classroom stamp club. (SKC)

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Teachers' Notes

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For the teacher

P.S. Write Soon! is directed at the child. The aim is to introduce young Australians to the joy of letter writing.

However, it has also been designed for classroom use and many of the exercises are ideal for both group and whole class work. Most of the suggested activities fit neatly into the school curriculum and can help give an added zest to writing and research projects. As it stands it speaks for itself.

But for the teacher who would like either a letter writing strand as part of the process writing unit or a special 'Letter Writing Month' project, we've provided a little more. In the next few pages you'll find suggestions as to how to weave letter writing into every subject area. Try just a few to see how quickly your pupils' written expression develops and matures.

And maybe you'll have time to write to a few old friends yourself?

If you do, be sure to add the postscript:

P.S. Write Soon!

The craft of letter writing

The rules are simple (though they have changed a little since most of us were at school), but we can't expect children to know the conventions of letter writing unless we show them exactly what to do.

The easiest way is to hold a couple of practice letter writing sessions in which you all examine and follow the setting-out procedure of address, date, salutation etc (see 'Letters Can Make Things Happen', pl6-25, in PS. Write Soon). After these sessions let them write to you or to each other, electing a class postie to collect and deliver, then setting aside time for the reading and answering of these letters.

Make sure there are models showing how to set out personal and business letters on permanent display and share samples from your own mail. Show the children what the school stationery looks like and perhaps hold a competition to design a special letterhead for your class. Discuss the pleasure of birthday and Christmas mail and encourage an awareness of the delight an unexpected note or card can give.

For easy reference, pin up a *Letter Proofreading Chart* similar to the ones you use for writing in various subject areas.

eg Have you written your own address clearly at the top of your letter?
Have you put the date?
If it's a business letter, have you put the person's name, title and address before beginning the letter?
Have you set it out clearly and neatly?
Have you asked someone to help you check the spelling and punctuation?
Is your handwriting neat enough to be read easily?
Does your letter say exactly what you want it to say?
Can it be improved?
(Ask for help if you don't know quite what to do)
Have you addressed your envelope like this?
(Provide model)

Even quite young classes can soon master the technique of writing a business letter and will appreciate the need for a rough draft. A good tip to use when first trying these is to get the children to write each sentence separately. Later they cut these into strips and try rearranging them until they find the order that flows best. Then they make a fair copy.

It's important to explain that these are always more formal than letters to friends and family because usually you do not know the person to whom you are writing. But there's no reason to delve into the whys and wherefores of letter writing conventions. Simply point out that this is the way it's done in business and that the person getting the letter will be impressed by the writer's skill if it's done properly.

Before unleashing your budding correspondents on the business world, let them invent companies or departments or VIP's to write to so they can enjoy the process while polishing their technique. Some starters?

Tom Cat writes to the Perfect Pussycat Food Company congratulating them on their new mouse-flavoured brand.

Matilda writes to the Commonwealth Games Federation requesting the games be held in Australia again soon.

The Old Woman who lived in a shoe writes to the Mayor of Nurseryville to ask if anything can be done about the severe housing shortage.

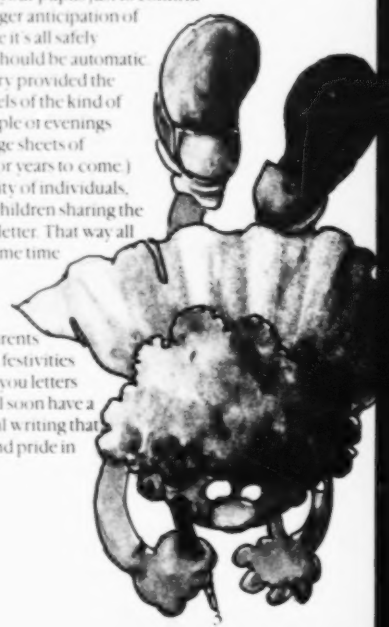
Developing the writing habit

Wise teachers make the writing of letters of invitation, of thanks, of appreciation, a vital but routine part of class management. They're the perfect answer to providing a real audience for young writers. And, of course, give the chance to develop an awareness of the need for courtesy and good manners in one's dealings with people outside the classroom. (Besides which it's so much more practical. Which of us has to write descriptive prose or a short story during working hours? Yet we all have to write some kind of letter sooner or later.)

Arranging an excursion? Phone, by all means when making arrangements, but make sure the call is followed up by a letter from one or more of your pupils just to confirm details and express the class' eager anticipation of what's to be seen or done. Once it's all safely concluded, a thank you letter should be automatic.

No extra work is necessary provided the children have been given models of the kind of letter they should write. (A couple of evenings spent printing examples on large sheets of cardboard will pay dividends for years to come.) The task can be the responsibility of individuals, pairs or even groups, with the children sharing the job of composing the relevant letter. That way all get a chance to contribute at some time during the year.

Add on the letters of invitation to speakers or class helpers, to parents and grandparents when Open Day or Book Week festivities come round, plus all the thank you letters back to those people, and you'll soon have a calendar full of busy, purposeful writing that gives a reason for taking care and pride in what's being presented.



How to be a FLW* class

First week of first term pin up a chart headed 'People who have helped us this year' and organise pupil helpers who will make sure names are added as you go. Parents who help in the tuckshop or the library or on the pedestrian crossing? Dads and mums who come in to talk about their jobs or hobbies? Grans and granddads who have made costumes or loaned articles for class exhibitions? . . . Anyone and everyone who has given a helping hand in the smooth running of the classroom.

Then come 1 December, organise a full Make-a-Card Day at the end of which you allocate one to each helper, sign 'With many thanks for help this year from Class . . .' and post or deliver. . .

If all this becomes an automatic but important part of classroom routine, you'll not only ease the usual teacher burden, you'll also know you're helping each year's crop of youngsters discover the fun and warmth that comes from doing the right thing. Manners *do* matter – more so now than ever in this grab-the-phone, shut-up-the-TV's-on, I'm-too-busy-to-be-bothered hectic old world we've helped create for our young.

*Stands for Fabulous Letter Writing

P.O. Box in the classroom

Sure stimulus for lots of letter writing is to have your own classroom post box. Made from a suitable carton or box painted bright red, complete with instructions re delivery times, it can provide the focus for a great deal of extension work.

Finished first? Write and post a letter to a classmate in the time you've got left over. Wet lunch hour? Write notes to all your friends so as to catch the afternoon delivery. Completed your group work or project before the others? Write a letter to the teacher to say what you enjoyed or disliked about the assignment.

By using letter writing as an absorber of spare moments, the crafty teacher kills two birds with one stone. There's no excuse for idle hands when there's a letter to write. And the more letters children write the better their written expression becomes. Besides, what fun to work in a class where the teacher *wants* you to write notes!

Rules? Just insist that messages be positive and wholesome and keep an eye open at delivery time to make sure no one is being left out. You'll be able to redress the balance yourself and will probably find that a note in the class letter box from time to time will give you the opportunity to pass on such morale boosting messages as *'I've noticed how hard you've been working lately and am so pleased'*, or *'I saw how unselfishly you helped the others yesterday. I'm proud of you.'* Another valuable exercise is to use the post box for letters of apology. Friends fallen out? Suggest they write to say *'I'm sorry.'* Squabbles in the playground or classroom? Fighting or name-calling? Make the punishment a letter of apology.

It all does wonders for the tone of the classroom. Try it and see!

A List to pin up near the Class Post Box

Ideas for letters and notes:

1. Tell a friend a riddle or joke
2. Share a secret
3. Write a message in code
4. Tell a classmate the title of a beaut book to read
5. Tell a friend she or he is looking good today
6. Tell the teacher what you've liked best about today
7. Make up a poem and post it to the person sitting next to you
8. Make a list of 5 of the longest words you know (a dictionary will help you) and send them in a note to a classmate
9. Find six words that describe a friend. Send them in a note and ask her/him to do the same back to you
10. Send a fan letter to the person most helpful in the class
11. Invent a really difficult maths problem and send it to the person who comes after you on the roll
12. Start a paper chain letter, asking each person in the class to add a tongue twister. See how long it takes to get back to you
13. Write a note to someone whose first name begins with the same initial as your own

(More ideas in 'Letters Can Be Fun', p26-33, in P.S. Write Soon)

How to earn a Fabulous Letter Writer's Badge

1. Write a letter to every member in the class sometime before the end of the year. (That includes the teacher!)
2. Try every one of the ideas suggested.
3. Write a letter to each person in your family.

NB Fabulous Letter Writer's Badges can be made from cardboard, with ribbon or foil added. Tape a safety pin to the back. Be sure to make a big production of the ceremony!

Sample

Class writing projects

The World's Longest Letter

Ideal for a letter to send to another class (especially in another school), to a classmate in hospital or one kept at home for any reason. All you need is a roll of shelf paper or greaseproof paper, or perhaps one of those computer continuous paper stacks, felt-tipped pens, stickers etc and you're ready to start.

Hold the usual brainstorming session first. Discuss what topics the person or people receiving the letter would be most interested in and list these on chalkboard or a large sheet of litho paper. Suggest humorous items (the disastrous teachers' three-legged race at the sports, the stray dog that insisted on singing along with the school choir at the school concert) and descriptions of class disasters (what happened when the big jar of red paint was spilt, the deep despair when none of the seeds you planted germinated), as well as accounts of successful excursions and test results and stunning craft projects.

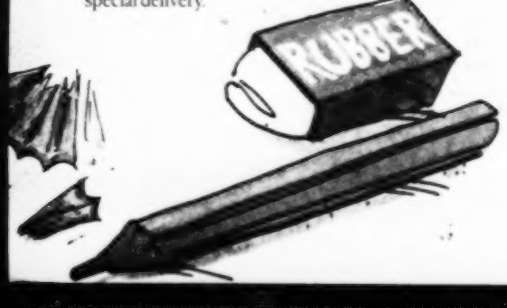
Once the class is bubbling with ideas, set each pupil to work writing a first draft of one or two paragraphs. Let them try reading these aloud to each other, working in pairs or groups, then follow up with revision and recopying, making sure they share the task of proofreading. When paragraphs are polished and ready, it's time to compose the letter. Then let each pupil paste his or her paragraph in turn, decorating borders and paragraph breaks. Leave space for illustrations where wanted and tuck in a few riddles and rhymes to add flavour. (Don't forget your own contribution either.)

Signatures can be added as you go, or the class may vote in favour of a group signature at the end. Then, if it's to another classmate, you can add: P.S. Can you work out who wrote what?

The World's Biggest Letter

Make this one a letter to the principal, the librarian or a younger class.

After you've all decided what you want to write, get each pupil to write his or her sentence or paragraph first while sitting at a desk. When ready to begin, spread a sheet of litho paper on the floor and let each in turn print or write the proofread contribution across the sheet. (Suggest this be larger than usual and vary the colour of the pens so that each child's message stands out clearly.) Decorate any way you like, then fold in four. Make an envelope to fit (lots of maths involved here) and choose four 'posties' to make a special delivery.



Dear Teacher . . .

Once a term (beginning or end) ask the children to write you a letter telling honestly what they have enjoyed and what they've disliked about their school work so far. In the non-threatening, open-discussion classroom this is an exercise with big bonuses for pupils and teacher.

Encourage them to mention things that worry them or that they're nervous of, but aim at an overall positive note by asking for suggestions about any rule changes, ideas for excursions, games, titles of books for read-aloud sessions, project etc. And consider them all seriously. Most children are disarmingly open if given the chance, so you'll learn a lot. They are also basically fair-minded, so take time to explain just why it isn't possible to arrange an excursion to that certain fun park or give up EVERY morning to reading or games. Your answer can take the form of a chat session at the end of the day in which you comment favourably on at least one point from each letter, or perhaps you may like to write one long letter back. Start: *Dear Giuseppe, Sasha, David, Helen . . .* etc and go on to praise all their suggestions and promise to help with the things that worry.

(It's a good idea to note privately any really fearful comments and follow up later with a personal note and chat with that particular child.)

Post your letter in the class post box with instructions that it be handed round and read by each in turn.

Welcome to Class . . .

Imagine the impact on a new class when each member finds a welcome letter from the class before waiting on his or her desk that first day. Such a simple exercise, yet one capable of giving tremendous pleasure. This is one project that has to be organised in the last couple of weeks of the school year. It's also one that's ideal for group work.

First step, as always, is the discussion period. What information do present pupils feel will be the most useful to the newcomers?:

- Class rules?
- A list of where everything is?
- How to spell the teacher's name?
- Helpful hints on what you do on wet days, class excursions etc?
- How to help make this the best class in the school?

Pool ideas and talk over letter format.

Next move either to group compositions or individual efforts in which all the main points are covered. Then have each writer add a personal note of welcome. Maybe a copy editing team can help with final drafts, then finished letters can be handed in ready to be distributed to the next year's batch.

An extension of this idea is to have the class make 'We're Glad You're Here' cards to be handed to new pupils on their first day of school.

Across the curriculum with a social studies bias

Letters are such a superb form of project, it's surprising that they're not used more often.

Sample only a few of the following suggestions for a program that's certain to engender intense interest both at school and at home.

Anywhere letters

Inside Australia

Use a class letter to introduce your pupils to another state, another region (eg a port or seaside resort if you live inland, a fruit growing area if your district is industrial), or even, if your school is in a large city, to a distant suburb.

Depending on age, opt for the composite class letter, half a dozen group letters, or individual notes from each pupil – whichever best suits your class and purpose. Use discussion first to establish which questions you'd like answers to.

eg What makes their city/suburb/state ... special?
What are their biggest and/or most famous buildings?
When were these built, what are they used for?
Have they any local statues? Who do they represent? Why?
What is the main industry in the area?
What are the local scenic spots? The most popular sports?
How do most pupils get to school?

Gentle nudging should produce a series of questions that will provide general information about the geography, history and economy of the chosen area.

Next step is to address the letter(s) to a class of a similar year to your own. (A prior phone call or a letter of your own can help pinpoint which school in the area would be most appropriate.) Once the long-awaited answers come, you'll be able to collate the information into a chart which can be shared with other classes. And because you've personalised the subject, you'll find the children will retain far more of what they've learned than they ever do when simply copying sentences from what are often out-of-date reference books. (P.S. It may even be possible to arrange a visit to consolidate the project and to allow pen friends to meet.)

Outside Australia

If you are lucky enough to teach in a school where the children are a rich ethnic mix, capitalise on this by setting up communication between your class and children in schools of different countries. Parents will be your main source of information here, so turn to them for help. You'll probably need interpreters and translators, but this will add to the excitement and involvement, while teaching the important lesson that a command of more than one language is an asset to be prized.

Initially keep these letters to an exchange of school news and information about holidays, customs, festivals etc so that each class may learn something of the daily routine followed by the other. Discussing similarities and differences can lead to valuable insights about the cultural heritage found within nationalities and also help your pupils to understand each other's backgrounds a little better.

Later, once the correspondence has been established, you can explore a little of the history and geography of each other's town, suburb, country.

Letters as bridges

Another interesting project is to survey the class to find out which pupils have relations or friends living in other states and/or other countries. Set aside a letter-writing time in which each pupil writes a personal letter to that relative or friend. For any who can't produce a name and address there are two solutions.

(a) Have the child write to someone at home or to your home address or that of a colleague.
(b) Provide the name yourself by contacting a teacher friend in another school to ask for a child willing to act as pen friend for the project.

Instruct pupils to end their letters as follows:
'This letter is part of a school project, so will you please write back immediately and tell me what date and, if possible, what time it was delivered to your home.'

When all are ready, address carefully and make a big production of posting, noting time and date carefully. To give added point to the project, gather information about what will happen to your letters once they land in the box. Find out how many people will be involved in the handling and sorting process and the forms of transport used to get each letter to its destination. Try to meet the local postmaster – she or he may welcome a personally

delivered class letter describing the project and may even be willing to give a quick on-the-spot interview about the handling and sorting process.

While waiting for answers prepare large maps (Australia, if your letters are internal ones, with a separate state or city one for local deliveries, the world for overseas letters). Pinpoint your school, town or city, using coloured wool or string to indicate the distances your letters have to travel. Then try to read some stories from each country featured, or perhaps learn a song or dance that is associated with its culture.

As replies come in, calculate the number of kilometres each letter has travelled and note how long it took to complete its journey. Collate the results and share final figures with the children's families.

Please-send-me-some-information letters

Writing with a purpose — writing for an audience: how much time and energy is often devoted to creating artificial exercises within the class writing program, when a letter is the perfect vehicle.

The business letter asking for information is generally short and follows a simple format. It's well within the capabilities of most primary pupils.

Do the children need to find out about Australian products? Much more interesting to write to the manufacturers of their favourite breakfast foods (perhaps including a graph to indicate class tastes) than to look up CEREALS in the school encyclopedia. Studying local government, minerals, pollution, transport, weather ...? All have departments that can be written to.

Where to start?

Pick up the phone book and check the sections given over to government. Cast your eye over the lists and a dozen project ideas will jump out at you.

For example:

Local Government

State Emergency Service (To ask what they do and if there's anything children can do to help).
Baby Health Centres, Meals on Wheels, Home Nursing Services, Community Aid (To gather information that will build up an understanding of the services offered in a municipality and the function of local government and the jobs it creates).
Parks and Gardens and Ovals (Set a series of excursions around these and write to express pleasure in what's provided and/or to make suggestions for extra facilities).
Senior Citizens Centres (Would older citizens enjoy answering letters about their childhood? The project could culminate in a Pleased-to-meet-you Picnic in the park).
Animal and Dog Pound (Find out how these operate. Can children help in community education? What kinds of animals are cared for?)
Libraries (A wonderful project in itself. Combine visits and letters).
Kindergartens, Child Care, Red Cross (Write to ask if you can raise money, donate toys, books etc. Also to learn more about the history of these organisations).
Police and Fire Departments (Invite officers in to talk about their work and career opportunities. Follow up with thank you letters).
Memorials (Write to ask for a list of local statues, dedicated buildings etc. and for any information about the history of these. Then arrange visits to take photographs and so compile a local history scrapbook to share with families).
After School Activities (Many communities have these. Write asking for information, especially about holiday camps etc).

State Government

Still more suggestions here:
A project on primary products?

Write to the *Agricultural Department, Fish Marketing Authority, Dairy Industry Marketing Authorities, Milk Board.*

One on resources?

Choose from *Department of Mineral Resources, Electricity Commission, Environment and Planning, State Pollution Control, National Parks and Wildlife Department.*

Transport?

Main Roads Department, Maritime Services, State Rail Authority, Traffic Authority.

Australian plants and animals?

National Parks and Wildlife Department.

History?

Historic Houses Trust, Heritage Council.

(NB: One important exercise with older pupils is to show how one obtains a copy of a birth certificate by writing to the *Registrar of Births, Deaths & Marriages.*)

Commonwealth Government

Yet more to think about –
Such as: Departments of *Aboriginal Services, Aviation Science, Apple and Pear Corporation*, the *ABC*, the *Australian Coastal Surveillance Centre*, the *Honey Board*, the *Wheat Board*, the *Coal Board*, the *Bureau of Meteorology.*

The idea is not to flood busy government departments with letters from school children. Rather it's a suggestion that good social science programs should also teach children something about government. The realisation of the areas and subjects covered can lead into an understanding of why such departments are necessary. It can also open up discussion of a fascinating variety of jobs.

But most importantly, you'll be developing young citizens who have a much wider appreciation about how to go about applying for information or how to begin to seek help in an increasingly complex society.

An emphasis on maths?

The letter writing project is superb in opening up practical maths experiments. Apart from graphing times and distances covered by your letters. There are all the calculations involved in cost of postage.

Collecting samples of stamps, finding out how many denominations are available, discovering the currency of other countries, exploring the reasons for rises in prices of stamps . . . all of these can sharpen mathematical awareness, while teaching application of basic computations.

And for fun how about a giant quiz? How many stamps for local letters can I buy with $5? When was the first postage stamp in the world issued and how much was it? . . . Have the children compile questions and answers, then print on a large sheet (complete with illustrations) before displaying to other classes.

Or, on a simpler note, for one week let your pupils invent their own problems using the postal system as a theme.

What about history?

There's almost too much to list!

Consider any of these –

- The story of the development of Australia's postal system, from row boats and horse drawn coaches to aeroplanes and electronic mail (see 'From Row Boat to Machine', p50-53, in P.S. Write Soon).
- Investigation of the invention of paper, envelopes, seals, gummed labels and stamps, pens, ink, typewriters etc.
- The growth of philately, both as a hobby and as a business (see 'By Gum, I'm Stuck', p56-59, in P.S. Write Soon).
- The new invention of electronic mail.
- Or discover Australian history through stamps collecting samples of those depicting historical figures, episodes etc and discussing other suitable subjects. (Follow up with a class letter to Australia Post suggesting these).

Music and poetry?

Look for stamps commemorating folk songs, poems and poets and find out more about these. Ask pupils why they have been chosen and browse through anthologies of Australian poetry to find other suitable poets or poems you all agree would make a good stamp series, looking especially at children's poets. (Share these too with Australia Post.)

Art and craft?

Apart from all the craft activities suggested in the pupils' book, consider getting pupils to try their hands at designing stamps. Many old paintings are featured on stamps, particularly Christmas issues, but as well there are instances of early Australian paintings in which the arrival of mail was the subject of the picture. Look especially for 'From a Distant Land' by David Davies and 'Arrival of the mail bag', an engraving from the Illustrated Sydney News, 6 September 1879.

A clutch of ideas for Creative Writing – to add to those suggested in the Pupils' Book.

What about . . .

Letters from a platypus to his Mum?
from a crocodile to her best friend?
from a dog to the postie?
from Cinderella to her fairy godmother?
from Jack the Giant Killer to a distant cousin?

Think about letters in a bottle. Invent an unlikely group of castaways and devise letters for them to send out on the next tide.

eg Saucy Sal, the shipwrecked pirate
Mournful Morris, the cabin boy, sole survivor of his crew
Foolish Fred, who went to sleep on his surfboard
Windsurfer Wendy who got carried out to sea

Try a series of Dear Dell . . . letters. (You know the kind asking for help), but using Nursery Rhyme characters.

eg Dear Dell, My clock seems infested by mice, or one mouse anyway. It appears every time the clock strikes one. Should I set the trap inside the clock or on top of it?

Anxious Clock owner

Dear Dell, Both my children recently had a nasty accident when fetching water for the weekly wash. My daughter, Jill has badly bruised elbows and knees and my son, Jack has a suspected fracture of the skull. What should I do?

Worried Mum

Classroom stamp club

Always popular with primary children, stamp collecting is not only an absorbing hobby. It's a marvellous way to develop vocabulary and a sense of geography and strengthens categorising skills as pupils develop theme sets of birds, flowers, ships, fish etc.

Invest in an Australia Post *Stamp Collecting Kit* for the classroom and encourage pupils to ask for these as birthday or Christmas gifts. There's also a special colourful leaflet called *Australian Stamp Explorer* which is available whenever a new stamp is issued. Simply write to Australian Stamp Explorer, PO Box 511, South Melbourne, Vic. 3205.